The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE PLACE IS HERE

AND THE TIME IS NOW

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Lord, open unto me
Open unto me — light for my darkness.
Open unto me — courage for my fear.
Open unto me — hope for my despair.
Open unto me — peace for my turmoil.
Open unto me — joy for my sorrow.
Open unto me — strength for my weakness.
Open unto me — wisdom for my confusion.
Open unto me — forgiveness for my sins.
Open unto me — love for my hates.
Open unto me — thy Self for my self.
Lord, Lord, open unto me! Amen.

Howard Thurman
Meditations from the Heart

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Scripture
Acts 1:1-11
Acts 2:1-13

"... why do you stand looking up at heaven?
Acts 1:11a (NRSV)

James Carroll is a writer I had the privilege of meeting a few years ago at a seminary in New York for people who were interested in religion and literature. Jim Carroll, who had been a priest but was now a working writer, told his story, a powerful and compelling tale. He has written a book about it, which received a favorable review in the *New York Times Review of Books* last Sunday. His father had always wanted to be a priest, but became a policeman instead. During World War II, he was in military intelligence and rose through the defense intelligence apparatus to the very top — during the Vietnam War. His son, perhaps fulfilling his father's vocational dream, went to seminary. And then came Vietnam, and Jim Carroll, now a priest, disagreed fundamentally with his nation's position and behavior and became involved in the anti-war movement. Father and son were alienated, angry, disappointed in each other. At the same time Carroll began to feel called to be a writer. And in the midst of all that chaos, turmoil and alienation, he took a trip to Israel to "find something that might shore up his commitment. Instead he found rank commercialism around the site held to be Jesus' burial place." I could identify with that — having experienced the same thing recently. Groups wait for a long time in long lines, threading their way through the nave of an Orthodox church for a five second peek into a tiny grotto where there are hundreds of candles and icons. Almost everybody experiences it as an assault on the senses and religious sensitivities. So did Jim Carroll, looking for something to believe in and hold on to, "He walked away in disgust" as everybody is tempted to do. But, Carroll found himself returning, prompted, he says, "by the sure knowledge that God comes to us in the mess of our conflict, confusion and chaos." [*New York Times*, 5/19/96]

That, I propose, is a secondary text for this day. "God comes to us in the mess of our conflict, confusion and chaos." For Jim Carroll that sure knowledge, that experience of God's presence in the midst of vulgar commercialism, human opportunism, religious triviality, inspired him to continue his pursuit of his true vocation in the world, and he eventually resigned his ecclesiastical office and has worked as a writer ever since, dealing eloquently and powerfully with the "mess of conflict, confusion and chaos" which is human life.

It is the issue for thoughtful people. What does God have to do with the mundane reality that is human life, the wars, the suffering, the mass movements of human history, or the even more mundane reality that is my life, my conflicts, confusion and chaos?

It is surely the issue for a unique group of people, hiding in a room somewhere in the city of Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago. The disciples and friends of Jesus were still in the city six weeks after the traumatic events that culminated in his crucifixion. Some of them believed he was alive. Some said they had seen him, talked with him. Not all of them believed it. And so they were still there, waiting.

The way the first historian of the movement tells it, Jesus had ascended to heaven. The writer's name is Luke and he is an artist, not a newspaper reporter. The event we know as the ascension is a theological affirmation that Jesus is with God, that Jesus' life, death and resurrection are the living out of the reality of God in human history, that the Risen Christ reigns — which does not mean from a golden throne in heaven, but that Christ reigns here and now, is the ultimate reality now, and not death, not anything else in creation. It is Christ who lived and died and rose for us and from whose love we will never be separated. That's the meaning of the ascension. Jesus Christ is Lord.

And at the end of Luke's portrayal of that truth there is one of my very favorite bible verses. The picture Luke draws, and which countless artists have tried to express, mostly unsatisfactorily, trying to show Jesus disappearing through the clouds ... the picture is of a group of people — on a hillside — the tourist industry in Jerusalem will show you the hill, the very rock from which he was launched, with what appears to be a footprint — burned, I whimsically concluded, by the heat of lift-off. In any event, they're astonished as they witness this mysterious

occasion and they're looking up — which seems an appropriate thing to do. Suddenly there are two men in white robes. Now, I made a connection this year as I read these texts. I think they are the same two who appear at the empty tomb on the first day of the week, when a group of women try to find the body to anoint it properly for burial. Do you remember that wonderful encounter? The same author, Luke, wrote it. The women are looking for a corpse. They are, I assume, in deep and profound grief, they have come to the garden tomb to anoint the body and they are crushed emotionally, hopes dashed, heart broken. And the two men show up and ask one of the most impertinent, but as it turns out, relevant questions in human history "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

So, don't you think they are the same two who show up at the Ascension and ask a second wonderfully impertinent and equally relevant question — "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?"

It's actually the same question, is it not? The first believers keep looking in the wrong direction, the wrong places.

So, now they are waiting in the room in Jerusalem and Luke tells another fantastic story. On the day of Pentecost, a Jewish agricultural festival, Luke tells another fantastic story. The Spirit of God came upon them and once again it's the literary artist, not a newspaper reporter, telling the story. It's an experience that defies description — wind and fire and lots of noise and confusion and the suspicion on the part of those who witness it that the friends of Jesus have been drinking wine early in the day and are already drunk. But by the end of the day the most remarkable thing has happened. The frightened confused friends of Jesus have come out of hiding, have gone public and, more important, have been given the ability to communicate, to speak and be heard, to convey good news to all nations. A community has happened, a visible, human, this-worldly-institution, the church! It is our birthday and we celebrate with red banners and paraments. (They are not there for the Bulls - but it is a nice coincidence!)

What Luke is saying in these wonderful stories is that what began in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus continues in this new turn of events, this newly public and already notorious institution, the people of God, the church. The action, Luke is saying, is right here on earth, not in heaven, although it is clear that heaven is where everybody wants to go — eventually, if not right now, and to look for religious reality - up in the clouds. "Pie in the sky bye and bye" an old professor of religion of mine called it. But the energy, the spirit, the reality of things, the presence of God, the power of the resurrection is right here in the mess of our conflict, confusion and chaos.

The first and perhaps basic assignment for the friends of Jesus, the church, is to look for him in the right place: to worship and adore him, to follow and obey him in the place he chooses to be. That place, apparently is here. That time is now.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, head of the Church of England, and spiritual head of all the Anglican/Episcopal churches in the world, visited Chicago last week. Our Episcopal Bishop, Frank Griswold, and the Dean of St. James Cathedral, Todd Smelzer, both good neighbors and good friends, invited me and Father Robert McLaughlin, pastor of Holy Name Cathedral, to represent neighboring congregations in a wonderful Service of Worship for the Evening last Tuesday. The Episcopalians, by the way, know how to do this sort of thing. The liturgy and music were wonderful. The Cathedral was full. An elegant dinner for 900 served in a marquee which filled the entire block between Rush and Wabash. The Archbishop was charming and he told a pertinent story warning the Episcopalians, but all of us actually, against spending time pining over the lost grandeur of the past. The Archbishop recounted that "it was said of one of my clergymen in the Canterbury diocese that he was so backward looking that he wouldn't know the future if it ran over him."

The temptation for Christians today is perhaps not so much to look up as to look back. The churches that like to call themselves mainline are prone to a lot of nostalgia these days — recalling how it used to be, how prominent and powerful and robust we were thirty or forty years ago, trying sometimes to recover that whole ethos, focusing on the past, not the present. And sometimes we employ the same dynamic about our personal lives.

The basic issue has always been the relationship of God to the world, and the place or places where the life of faithfulness to God is to be lived. The wonderful stories of Ascension and Pentecost are clear. The place is here — the time is now.

What kind of place and time is it? Well, for one thing, it is a place and time in which it is not particularly easy to be a believer; a "culture of disbelief," Stephen Carter called it.

John Updike makes the point eloquently in his new novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, in the story of four generations of an American family in which the existence of God and the vitality of religion slowly but steadily diminishes. It begins with a minister, the Reverend Clarence Wilmot, losing his faith, in an intellectual struggle with the great academics of the day, Charles Darwin and Robert Ingersoll, the popular American atheist. Wilmot feels the "last particles of faith, leave him. The sensation was distinct — a visceral surrender, a set of dark sparkling bubbles escaping upward" [p. 5] Two generations later his granddaughter, Alma, is a movie star. Religious faith has faded from the life of the family, as Updike proposes it has from much of the culture, and is now a relic, trivial, marginalized, making a final appearance in a fanatic, violent cult. But mostly it is simply not important. Early in her film career Alma is talking to an important director who asks her about her religion.

> "'You a Christian Scientist?' Mr. Cohn asks.
>
> 'Oh no,' Alma said ... 'I'm a Presbyterian.'
>
> 'I'll bet you are. Well, whatever helps you through the night' he said, and sighed in dismissal." [p. 331]

Professor Hans Kung, Roman Catholic theologian, in his monumental work *Does God Exist?*, argues that it is the fundamental issue of the day. Atheism, Kung says, has been supported and assisted, not so much by its academic proponents as by religion which is divorced from human life and human struggle. Marx and Lenin thought that religion was the opiate of the masses, a narcotic which anesthetized people to the suffering and injustices of life. Marxism/Leninism, therefore, espouses a completely secular, godless state and in order to encourage its emergence, which they were absolutely certain would happen, imposed severe restrictions on religion and sometimes outright persecution of the church. What they didn't count on was the basic relationship of God to the realities of life even when public religion is not evident, life and death and birth and sickness and love and the struggle for freedom and liberty. And so while the state could exercise some control over the church as a public institution, the people of God continued to believe, and to live faithfully and now, once again, the churches are full.

The enemy of authentic faith is not official atheism, not noisy adherents of secularism, not opponents of prayer in school or state sponsored religious observances. The real enemy is but a bland religion with its head in the clouds and its vision focused on the past.

I have always loved what Don Benedict, former head of the Chicago City Missionary Society, a strong and a courageous leader in our city, said about urban churches. "It is the job of urban churches," Benedict said, "to keep alive the rumor that there is a God."

Faith that has something to do with real life, not a set of vague ideas to ponder.

The ascension of Christ and the descent of the Spirit on Pentecost are not abstractions. They are about a new truth let loose in the world with very practical implications.

Where do you experience the presence of God in your life? If you were asked to identify where the Spirit has come to you what would you say?

Most of us, I think, would do something like look up or back, searching our memory, or look for some high, holy perhaps emotionally charged experience of overwhelming spirituality, only to discover that most of us don't have very much to talk about.

So, may I suggest where the Spirit does come; where the presence of God and the reality of the resurrection of God's son Jesus comes into the chaos and confusion of life?

I believe God's Spirit comes to us when two people who have been alienated by things done and said; separated by hurt and anger; when one of them lets it go and extends forgiveness, and anger melts and reconciliation happens. That's God's spirit.

I believe God's Spirit comes in the gift of creativity. When the artist, musician, dancer, sculptor, loses himself/herself in the act of creating and out of nothing comes beauty.

And I believe God's spirit, God's breath, is given every time human birth occurs.

I believe God's Spirit comes when people communicate, as at Pentecost, when we are given voices to speak and ears to hear one another; in the midst of issues which divide, and about which we are bitter, shouting and arguing and refusing to listen.

I believe God's Spirit comes when we find one another in love, and when we lose ourselves in passion.

And I believe God's Spirit comes as it did at Pentecost when we experience loss and wonder how in the world we can go on.

There is no more practical concern nor common experience than loss: loss of loved ones, loss of parents, loss of friends, loss of a job, loss of youth, loss of dreams and aspirations, loss of excitement and vigor. So common and so important is the human experience of loss that it seems to exert a kind of power over us. Loss, and its resultant grief, seems sometimes to be the master of our fate.

But Jesus Christ reigns, there is a power more real than our losses, there is something more fundamental than our experiencing of grief no matter how intense, and it is the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his Lordship.

It is what we have to offer the world and one another. It is all we have to say to a terminally ill patient, Jesus is Lord. It is all we have for the mother of a soldier killed in battle, Christ reigns. It's the word of encouragement we have when we flunk out of school, or lose our job, or when our dearest love walks out, or the test comes back positive. It is what every minister tries to find the words to say at every funeral, that Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God and comes again into the mundane, every day reality of our life.

It is our fundamental word. And there is one other. "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" Equally strong and important is that Pentecost word: that God comes to us where we are, that God loves us where we are, that God's kingdom begins here, "on earth, as it is in heaven."

At the heart of Christian faith is not a list of beliefs but the experience of men and women, beginning with that strange day when the Spirit came to them on the wind, blowing like the breath of God, the experience of God's presence, in the mess and chaos and confusion, and the passion and exhilaration and joy of our lives.

Why do you stand looking up? The place is here and the time is now. Like a mighty wind God came — like the very air we breathe, God is present.

Thanks be to God.